

VZCZCXRO2873
PP RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHUJA #1593/01 2070900
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 260900Z JUL 07 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY ABUJA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0376
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHWR/AMEMBASSY WARSAW 0471
RUEHCD/AMCONSUL CIUDAD JUAREZ 0471
RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS 7493
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHINGTON DC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001593

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DOE FOR CAROLYN GAY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: CONFLICT CONTINUES ON BENUE-TARABA BORDER

REF: 01 ABUJA 3239 AND PREVIOUS

ABUJA 00001593 001.2 OF 002

SUMMARY

¶1. Since renewed fighting began along the Benue-Taraba boundary five weeks ago, no fewer than twenty people have died and at least five villages have been razed. For decades the Tivs and Jukuns, the two ethnic groups residing along the border, have engaged in intermittent fighting and there is potential for more deaths and an increased number of internally displaced peoples within the region. Local leaders have appealed to both the state and federal government to intervene and send relief materials for the displaced families.

BACKGROUND

¶2. There has been a long standing dispute between the Jukuns of Taraba State and the Tivs of Benue State with periodic fighting occurring since the late 1950's. The two groups have found it increasingly difficult to coexist peacefully and violence escalated over the last decade. The conflict centered on competition for land, economic resources and political power. Political battles focused on the boundary between Benue and Taraba and the polarity of the ethnic groups gave way to physical violence and segregation as many Tivs fled their homes and villages to escape persecution by the Jukuns. Due to the renewed violence, Tivs are once again fleeing from the border towns to Katsina-Ala and Gboko, both towns located in Benue State several miles from the fighting.

VIOLENCE IN 2001

¶3. Following an outbreak of violence in October of 2001, the federal government deployed peacekeeping troops around the borders of Benue and Taraba at the request of then Taraba State Governor, Rev. Jolly Nyame. On October 10, 2001, 19 soldiers were ambushed, captured and killed by a group of Tiv in the town of Vatse. A few days later the soldiers' mutilated bodies were discovered in a primary school in the nearby town of Zaki-Biam, a Tiv stronghold in Benue State. According to locals, the murders were prompted by previous incidents in which armed men in uniform attacked several

Tiv communities. There is a strong suspicion among Tivs that elements of the military are backing their Junkun rivals.

¶4. The murder of these 19 soldiers segued into a violent massacre at the end of October 2001 which led to the destruction of Zaki-Biam town in Benue State. From October 22 through November 2, 2001, members of the Nigerian Army destroyed several Tiv villages, most notably Zaki-Biam, as part of a collective punishment campaign to avenge their 19 fallen comrades. Retired General Victor Malu, a Tiv from Benue, accused Retired General T.Y.Danjuma, a Jukun from Taraba who was Minister for Defense then, of leading the onslaught on Zaki-Biam where General Malu's 80-year-old uncle and his entire family were burnt to death in their house. In sum, no fewer than 1,000 houses were destroyed in the operation that led to the killing of hundreds of people, the razing of more than 20 Tiv villages and the displacement of thousands of people.

¶5. A Judicial Commission of Inquiry convened on March 4, 2002 to investigate the incident. The panel published a report dated April 7, 2003 that found the reprisal killings of the people of Benue State by the Nigerian Army unjustified and unconstitutional. Sadly, there are no indications that anyone has ever been or will ever be prosecuted for the murders. However, On Thursday, July 5, 2007, Justice Lewis Allagoa of the Enugu High Court ordered the Federal Government to pay N41.8 billion to families of victims of the 2001 Zaki-Biam massacre. The judge ordered that the amount be paid jointly by the defendants, including the Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces, the Chief of Army Staff and the Minister of Defense. The payments are to come from the current governments funding for those positions, leading many to believe an appeal by the federal government is expected.

RECENT VIOLENCE

ABUJA 00001593 002.2 OF 002

¶6. The renewed violence along the Benue-Taraba boundary claimed nine lives the weekend of July 20 and people are once again fleeing from the border towns to Katsina-Ala and Gboko. On Thursday, July 19, a bus leaving Taraba State carrying youths to the western part of the country ran into an ambush set up by a group of Tiv. The armed men reportedly opened fire on the bus, killing nine people and injuring others. Seeking revenge, fighters from Taraba staged a reprisal attack on the Tiv communities along the border. However, the results of these attacks are unclear as the border communities, from Kwaghaondo Village in Benue State to Takum in Taraba State, are said to be completely deserted. The mass movement from the border area began two weeks ago with the alleged killing of two men in military uniform. The identity of the two murdered men has not been released, but the Tiv residents took flight to avoid any retaliation similar to the events of 2001. Hundreds of people have been displaced in the last few weeks, creating a strain on the local economies and small towns that are not equipped for the influx of people. Spokesman for the affected Tiv communities, Mr. Edward Kwaghaondo, has appealed to the National Emergency Management Agency for relief materials for the displaced families.

COMMENT

¶7. The news of the court-ordered compensation for the victims of the Zaki-Biam massacre is an encouraging step forward. However, the fact that no perpetrators have ever been criminally prosecuted demonstrates the flaws that still remain in the justice system. It is unclear at this time whether the July 5 ruling for compensation fuelled renewed violence, but Post will continue to monitor the situation. Continued violence between the Tivs and Junkuns is likely and there is a possibility it could escalate. It remains to be seen whether the Yar'Adua government will intervene and if they can broker peace rather than inflaming the conflict as happened in ¶2001.

